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## Hidden treasures: Four great reasons to sign up for an international mission

By Sherylyn M. Watson

While watching the devastating scenes and hearing the tragic stories from Haiti, were you drawn to wanting to help? What would you say if you received a phone call asking you to join a health care mission team to help the victims of this catastrophic earthquake?

I am a nurse who has said yes to calls to volunteer internationally for the past 10 years. Whether aiding victims of the tsunami in Sri Lanka and Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi or traveling on prearranged annual mission trips, I discovered personal and professional fulfillment. As one of the founding members of the charity PRN Relief International, one of my responsibilities is to recruit new members of the team for weeklong trips. During these interviews, I find nurses' most frequently *unasked* question is, "What's in it for me to take the plunge and join a mission?"

Drawing upon vignettes excerpted from my journals, here are four great reasons to say yes to an international volunteer mission trip.

### Reason 1: Receiving much more than you give

*People waited to see our team for six hours today—sitting in the hot sunshine of 98 degrees. A little girl with large brown eyes and ribbons in her hair came up to me in the early afternoon and whispered it was time for lunch. She handed me her bowl of rice and peas to eat. I looked at the people lined up in the street and knew they hadn't drank or eaten either, and they were the ones scorching in the sun. She hugged my leg and said thank you.*



Shery Watson and friends

My team and I are often amazed, and gratified, that patients are willing to wait all day to see us. Just as gratifying is knowing that I can take my time with patients without feeling the pressures of the ticking clock. This is one reason why these short trips energize and rejuvenate me professionally. When I look into a patient's eyes, I am reminded over and over again why I became a nurse—that the gift I am giving them with my knowledge and time is a fraction of what they give me. If you say yes to a mission trip, this can happen to you.

### Reason 2: Experiencing the true essence of “team” from Day One

**Doctor:** “Which medications did you pack that we can use for this 90-year-old blind woman, who hasn't left her house in two years?”

**Nurse:** “Well, let's see. When will she get another check-up? What is the goal for her blood pressure?”

**Doctor:** “We don't want to drop it too much. What do you think?”

Building trusting relationships with professional colleagues takes time in a nurse's normal workday world. When away on a mission, I find teamwork and collaboration happen naturally and instantaneously. Upon arrival, our surgical team prepares for the week ahead by reviewing the list of scheduled patients. Once onsite, in the makeshift clinics, our medical teams organize the day. Everyone needs to be flexible, because every day is different. We might be under a tarp, in a school or in a one-room house. On occasions when no children have required care, our pediatricians have partnered with nurses to treat adults. There's no one to call, so we rely on each other's expertise. Throughout the week, we continue to adapt to challenging situations. Everyone's voice is heard and respected. If you say yes to a mission trip, this can happen to you.

### Reason 3. Clarifying life's priorities

*Before the mission trip, four nurses harassed me about Internet access. On the last day of the trip, I asked them if they were able to log in. All looked at me in astonishment, realizing that the entire week went by, and they never thought about checking e-mails from work.*

Placing my daily life on hold to help others in need allows me to take stock of what is important. I am not sure why, as I am exhausted mentally and physically by the end of each day. Perhaps, it is the contrast between my everyday life and my life as a volunteer. Conceivably, it is spending evenings in conversation with other volunteers, sharing life stories and thoughts about the day. Perhaps, it is the desire to capture all that is happening inside and outside in my journal for me to remember always. These trips remind me to appreciate the simple things when I return home. If you say yes to a mission trip, this can happen to you.

#### **Reason 4. Developing new friendships that last a lifetime**

*It has been an exhausting and immensely rewarding week. Lots of hugs and kisses at the airport, exchanging of numbers and e-mail addresses, and now we are back to our worlds. The last words I hear: "When can we all have dinner this month? And don't forget to tell me where to send your letter of recommendation."*

Sharing experiences unique to that week is intensely emotional, and it creates strong relationships between and among individuals in the group. I have come to cherish these personal and professional friendships. For some volunteers, the relationships are like having a second family—they support each other's personal choices and help fellow team members pursue new career opportunities. For example, one of our physicians is opening a new wellness center, and some of us are traveling cross-country to celebrate. If you say yes to a mission trip, this can happen to you.

I've highlighted four great reasons for joining a health care mission trip: receiving much more than you give, experiencing the true essence of "team" from Day One, clarifying life's priorities and developing new friendships that last a lifetime. International missions are not just for the patients; there are treasures hidden in these weeks to be discovered. Whether you volunteer today, tomorrow or in the future, the opportunity is always there. [RNL](#)

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